



Case studies: How can the arts and creativity support people who are shielding or vulnerable during Covid-19?

Organisation: Devon Recovery Learning Community (DRLC)

Region: South West England

Introduction

Since lockdown, the opportunity presented itself for the DRLC to develop a lively and three-dimensional online platform which has proven to be very successful. As well as offering over 40 courses through video-conferencing, we have also taken on over 100 new students who might not have otherwise normally accessed our courses face-to-face.

Numbers of students attending the online platform are shielding or self-isolating, many do not drive or find travel using public transport a barrier to attending our courses and so having courses they can attend online offers a helpful and accessible alternative. Some have expressed that they find attending courses online less stressful and that they feel more comfortable in their own surroundings.

As well as video-conferencing, the DRLC also offers online tutorials that tutors have uploaded on youtube, which include Imagination and Wellbeing, the Art of Wellbeing, Isolation Art Classes, craft tutorials, and more.

We also offer links and resources as well as activities and craft, including puzzles, jigsaws, mindful colouring and other printables.

Funders

We are funded by the NHS, although our partners contribute nearly half the cost it takes to deliver our courses. The DRLC has also received funds from the North Devon Coast of Outstanding Natural Beauty to offer The Lost Words: Poetry and Nature courses, funds from Active Devon for sports equipment, a Mid-Devon locality grant to help set up the Tiverton drop-in.

Who is it for?

The DRLC is an NHS service that offers free, open access courses to all adults over 18. The DRLC is not a clinical service and we do not take referrals from health professionals. Our students are people with lived experience of mental health difficulties, their family and friends, and the professionals who support them.

What outcomes were/are you aiming for?

Our outcomes are to promote mental health and wellbeing through a recovery learning approach based on an educational model to instil hope, opportunity and control. We believe that through education people can learn how to take care of themselves, and others more effectively.

Where is it happening?

South West of England, principally Devon, although our online reach is not limited by county boundaries. Recently we have begun taking on more students from the surrounding counties of Dorset, Somerset and Cornwall.

Are you working in partnership?

The DRLC has worked very successfully with many numbers of outside partners from the voluntary and community sector, local authorities, social prescribing link workers (community connectors), primary health care NHS services, and many other arts and cultural providers.

Our courses are frequently co-produced and co-delivered with our partners to endeavour to embed an awareness of and ability to support and promote mental health and recovery in the running of our communities. Our partners help to provide expertise, resources as well as the premises for hosting regular courses and drop-ins and other activities.

Current partners include:

Exmoor National Park
Dartmoor National Park
The Burton Museum and Art Gallery
The Thelma Hulbert Art Gallery
Museum of Barnstaple and North Devon
Torquay Museum
Tiverton Museum of Mid-Devon Life
University of Exeter, Department of Archaeology
Double Elephant Print Workshop
Exeter Scrapstore
The Sharpham Trust
OrganicARTS
Magic Carpet
Significant Seams
Hakeford Woods Forest School
Exeter College
Learn Devon
Shekinah
EDP Drug and Alcohol Services
Dartmouth Bell Ringers
St Sidwell's Community Centre
Horsemanship for Health
Butterfly Conservation

How many people took/are taking part?

We have 1944 students currently registered as students on our website, www.devonrlc.co.uk
In addition to students registering on our website to enrol on our courses, we take on average another 1000 students annually, with numbers increasing each year.

About 200 people accessing the DRLC are not active students but members of our Recovery Library which has its main base at St Sidwell's Community Centre in Exeter, but which has several regional satellite locations where we hold regular weekly drop-ins at the Thelma

Hulbert Art Gallery in Honiton, the Heathcoat Community Centre in Tiverton and soon to open, at the Torridgeside Link Centre in Bideford.

We have nearly 1000 followers on our facebook page.

For how long has it been happening?

The Devon Recovery Learning Community was founded in the Summer of 2013 and is ongoing.

What were/are the main outputs?

We offer free, open access courses to promote the mental health and wellbeing of adults in our communities. Learning is based in the values and principles of Recovery; and all our courses and activities are delivered according to an ethos of co-production to ensure our opportunities are informed by the voice of lived experience together with that of clinicians and health professionals.

As well as face-to-face courses, we have a developing an innovative and three-dimensional online platform to enable us to extend our reach into more rural parts of Devon and beyond.

The DRLC has always recognised the value of creativity and for this reason our creative courses form an integral part of our Recovery curriculum, from Rebuilding Your Life, Understanding Mental Health Issues and Treatments, and Developing Knowledge and Practical Skills, to Finding Meaning and Living Well, Getting Involved, and Wild Things! – unique area in our curriculum that aims to support people to challenge both mind and body through more adventurous activities such as Djembe Drumming, Music Composition and Song Writing, Geology, Outdoor Climbing and Surfing.

Practical outputs through recovery learning has given students confidence to contribute to publications such as Riding the Storms <https://ridingthestorms.co.uk/> produced in partnership with Recovery Devon, making contributions to exhibitions of arts and crafts, involvement in community initiatives such as the Teignmouth's annual Trailart event, establishing a Djembe Drumming Circle which regularly plays at St Michael and All Angel's Church Fete.

Since lockdown, several students and tutors have come forward with several creative initiatives for which we are looking to publish, including Esther's Weekly Musings, and a Recovery 'annual' that will include puzzles, word searches, mindful colouring, crafts and activities and word art (word clouds).

What have been the challenges and successes for you?

There are of course many challenges. Tutors have had to develop new ways of working and students have had to develop new ways of learning. Not everyone has reliable access to the internet; some people have no access to the internet or for whatever reason choose not to; video-conferencing can sometimes be patchy.

Ensuring the safety and security of the online platform presents some problems. Whilst most tutors and students use Zoom for its ease and accessibility, the NHS only supports Microsoft Teams which is not as suitable as a vehicle for teaching. The DRLC has had to create a robust procedure to ensure the security of our online courses and resources and this will need

regular monitoring to keep up with the technology. It has been a very steep learning curve that will take some time for tutors and students to get to grips with.

Further information

The Devon Recovery Learning Community (DRLC) is a service provided by Devon Partnership NHS Trust that offers opportunities to learn about mental health and recovery by providing a unique curriculum of courses designed to increase knowledge, understanding and skills to equip people with the tools they need to live a meaningful, productive and fulfilling life. We work with many partners across Devon who understand and embrace our principles of Recovery and who help us deliver a fabulous range of courses to promote hope, opportunity and choice. As a Recovery community we want to help our students take control and become an expert in their own wellbeing in order that they can get on with their life despite any mental health challenges they might face.

Our recovery courses are not an alternative to therapy or treatment.

Our students are not required to attend our courses prior to accessing mental health services.

Our courses are free because our students want to learn, not because they have to.

The Devon Recovery Learning Community is a free, open access service provided by Devon Partnership NHS Trust to promote learning opportunities for people to become informed about their mental health, find meaning and purpose, develop skills and be challenged in innovative ways to help them manage their personal recovery and wellbeing.

We work closely with partners across Devon to instil in an understanding and awareness around mental health and to embed recovery principles, such as hope, respect, acceptance, opportunity, choice and control, within the work everyone can do to contribute to the sustainable wellbeing of our communities. A recent example of the excellent work in partnership between the DRLC and Butterfly Conservation highlights the wonderful benefits that can be achieved that not only promoted the wellbeing of our students by giving them a sense of purpose and community engagement, but also contributed much to raise awareness and promote the conservation of the rare fritillary butterfly on Dartmoor (<https://butterfly-conservation.org/our-work/conservation-projects/england/all-the-moor-butterflies>).

Many of the courses, both online and face-to-face, that we offer are informed by creative activity through music, dance, crafts, the arts, woodworking, creative writing and poetry. The creative arts is like a golden thread that weaves itself throughout our recovery curriculum. It offers so many possibilities for people to have a voice and find expression for their mental health difficulties, and that helps them to connect with what is most basic for our humanity.

Indeed, as manager of the DRLC who brings my own lived experience of mental health issues as well as that of an artist and archaeologist, I cannot imagine the work I do promoting mental health and recovery without ensuring that the creative arts, in all its colourful and multi-faceted approaches, was not central to our activities.

For those most vulnerable in our communities, living in fear, anxiety, loneliness, and isolation, for those who have hallucinatory and other unusual experiences, struggling with restlessness

or the side effects of medication, finding creative expression through movement, music, painting and drawing, doodling, colouring, sewing, knitting, writing – can be the difference between life or death.

Just one example of this is our weekly Djembe Drumming group. After attending several Djembe courses several students came together of their own accord over the last eighteen months to form a drum circle with the support of the DRLC and continued instruction from our drum tutor. Meeting the group to discuss its importance as an ongoing DRLC 'project', I was touched to the point of tears to learn how much the group meant to both tutors and students alike. Each person around the drum circle was able eloquently to explain that as well as learning and teaching one another the rhythms and creating a good sound, what they valued most of all was the activity of making music together, having a purpose to get out of the house even just one day a week, being part of a group without judgment or criticism, and finding friendship through a common purpose. As much as, maybe even more than any course about psychiatric medications or treatments, opportunities to learn and develop our natural creativity brings much help and hope to those most vulnerable and needing to strike new paths to wellbeing.

www.devonrlc.co.uk

Devon Recovery Learning Community Facebook page